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Freedom of the mind threatened by war

Not long ago, a fifth-grade teacher spoke at a community meeting I held in southern Maine. He was distraught because he feared that he could not express his opposition to the impending war in Iraq without paying a heavy price. In a poem written earlier, he raised similar concerns. It reads, in part:

I had my class write the troops
I asked for a kids' support group.
Can I talk of peace?
I am told:
*Say the pledge; sing the anthem;
skip the question. ...*

Americans, of course, can dissent.
Yet we must be patriotic.
Can a good American dissent?
I am told:
*Say the pledge; sing the anthem;
skip the question.*

"To strike freedom of the mind with the fist of patriotism is an old and ugly subtlety," Adlai Stevenson Jr. said half a century ago. Yet that is what threatened to silence this intrepid teacher, along with Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle, Sen. John Kerry, actors Tim Robbins and Susan Sarandon, the Dixie Chicks, a hapless New York shopper sporting a peace message on his T-shirt, and countless others who have been chastised, arrested, banned, disinvited or intimidated by accusations that dissent is "unpatriotic."

"War never leaves a nation where it

found it," remarked the 18th-century British statesman Edmund Burke. America's war in Iraq and war against terrorism are no exception. Since Sept. 11, 2001, the United States has not only challenged its enemies with our military power, but, purportedly in support of that effort, challenged our own people's right to speak out. A growing hostility to views out of sync with the president's war plans is apparent in the halls of Congress, the media, schools, and other places where there should be a lively debate over American policy.

The eerie silence and one-sided view of reality has been fueled by statements and policies coming from the White House and Republican congressional leaders. The doctrine, "You're either with us or against us," first applied internationally after Sept. 11, has been alarmingly directed at domestic political discourse. As Attorney General John Ashcroft told a Senate committee: "To those who scare peace-loving people with phantoms of lost liberty, my message is this: Your tactics only aid terrorists, for they erode our national unity and diminish our resolve."

Sadly, the erosion of liberty is no phantom. Attorney General Ashcroft himself, to quote Burke again, has orchestrated "[t]he true danger[,] ... when liberty is nibbled away, for expedients, and by parts."

Among other things, he banned public and media access to deportation hearings in federal court and

ordered U.S. citizens to be treated as "military combatants," held without charge, and tried without access to counsel or meaningful judicial review. He issued guidelines (rejected by the secret intelligence court) that would have allowed prosecutors to direct searches without the law's requirement of probable cause.

Likewise, Ashcroft planned Operation TIPS, which would have encouraged citizens to spy on each other. He rewrote guidelines allowing the FBI to attend every worship service, political demonstration and public gathering,

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enter every Internet chat room, and look at commercial records that reveal an individual's buying preferences and travel and Internet records. All this information can now be gathered by the government whether or not there is any evidence of criminal behavior by the individual.

Under proposed legislation Ashcroft is drafting — the so-called Patriot Act II — a host of sweeping new powers would be authorized, including allowing the secret detention of American citizens held in connection with a terror investigation,

obtaining credit card and library records without a warrant, and repealing limits on local police spying on religious and political activity.

Public debate is also being stifled by a lack of balance and competing viewpoints in the media. There is little to offset the jingoistic reporting of cable TV and talk radio shows. On Fox News, editorial comment has come to replace news reporting. When MSNBC's Ashleigh Banfield pointed out the one-sided coverage of the war, she was roundly criticized by the media, and even NBC refused to back her up.

The news sources Americans rely on are increasingly controlled by a handful of owners, many with conservative political agendas that dovetail with the administration's. Clear Channel, for example, now owns about 1,200 radio stations, and its owners have sponsored "support the troop" rallies. Performers who espouse anti-war views are afraid they will be banned from the air if they speak their mind. Indeed, a Colorado station recently suspended two disc jockeys for playing songs by the Dixie Chicks.

Americans define ourselves by our freedom to question and criticize. If we surrender those rights, through the force of law, by intimidation, or as a result of ignorance, we compromise our very identity and the cause for which we fight.

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